

The ocean water quality off Orange County's beaches needs to be improved. There isn't much debate about that. Whether you are a surfer who has experienced sickness after catching rights on a Saturday morning; or a businessperson suffering losses after another summer day with the beach closed by high... The ocean water quality off Orange County's beaches needs to be improved. There isn't much debate about that. Whether you are a surfer who has experienced sickness after catching rights on a Saturday morning; or a businessperson suffering losses after another summer day with the beach closed by high bacteria levels in the ocean; or someone who just believes it's the right thing to do, there is agreement that our economic and environmental health is well-served by dealing with the problem of urban runoff polluting our beaches.

So, how do we do it?

First of all, we must understand what causes the problem. Pollutants are carried into the ocean from storm drains and creeks during dry months and at the "first flush" from rainstorms. These pollutants include automotive oil from roads, fertilizers from lawns, feces from wild and domestic animals, trash and anything else that gets discarded near a storm drain or creek.

There are those who believe we should change the behavior of people all across the state to fix this problem. They maintain that it should be illegal to wash your car in your driveway or to fertilize your lawn. Some people even believe it should be illegal to have a lawn or to water your plants in such a way that causes water to flow off your property. They want to ban fast food and coffee shops and smoking (even on your own property) within a mile or so of the beach.

One thing these people are still struggling with is how to prevent wild animals from defecating. I am sure they will think of some way to require that the animals wear diapers and to fine us if we do not put one on the nearest squirrel.

These ideas will not work, and they are incredibly intrusive. Are we to have police roaming the streets of Yorba Linda seeking the criminal behavior of using a wash bucket to remove bird droppings from your windshield? Shall we have to monitor new gangs who form to smuggle Diedrich's coffee cups into Laguna for the caffeine-impaired populace? Even if you were willing to try to regulate behavior in this way, it would be unenforceable and most freedom-loving Americans (this one included) would ignore the unreasonable dictates.

But there is a way that will work. The pollutants do not fly into the ocean. They can only get there by traveling through one of the finite number of creeks that run to the coast. Whether it's Salt Creek or North Creek or the Santa Ana River, we know where they are and what affect they have. We have the ability to clean up the water as it enters and leaves these waterways.

We are beginning the process of cleaning these creeks now. The Irvine Ranch Water District is in the middle of a project (made possible by a bill I carried in the State Legislature) to clean up the entire course of San Diego Creek, which flows through much of Irvine and empties into the Back Bay in Newport Beach. The district is using multiple solutions including filters and off-stream ponding to remove the pollutants.

The city of Dana Point recently opened a state-of-the-art, low-flow filtration plant at the mouth of Salt Creek. The county of Orange, along with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, have a plan to clean up Aliso Creek in south county. And a nonprofit group called MiOcean has raised hundreds of thousands of private dollars and assembled private-sector know-how to clean up creeks throughout the county.

We can have our cake and eat it, too. We can have pristine water at our beaches and in our creeks and still maintain our individual freedom at home.

We can and are doing it creek by creek and stream by stream. And we should continue until the job is done.

Then, we can drive to the beach in a freshly washed Woody and surf in clean water. How cool is that?